

Abiquiu offers innovative solution to bark beetle infestation

*Story and photo by Eric Garner
Senior park ranger, Abiquiu Lake*

Out in the piñon/juniper covered hills of Northern New Mexico, Abiquiu Lake personnel have been forced to come up with a natural resource plan aimed at limiting the damage of the area's pine bark beetle infestation. Bark beetles are tiny, about the size of the tip of a sharpened pencil, but they are efficient killers and prolific breeders. Without sufficient winter moisture, next year could be devastating in terms of further beetle damage to trees.

Piñon trees occupy about 9 million acres in New Mexico, and the piñon and ponderosa pine destruction in the northern half of the state could go above the current 80 percent in areas such as Los Alamos and Chama. The beetle infestation also could mean an early and severe fire season, as trees killed by the beetles become powder-keg dry.

Trees proliferated during the wet era of the mid-1970s to mid-'90s, crowding together and competing for water. Then drought struck and they became increasingly stressed. Without moisture, they were unable to seep protective sap to keep pests at bay. The bark beetles zeroed in on this vulnerability and struck the weakening trees with a vengeance. Bark beetles chew through the bark and excavate a chamber in the moist tissue beneath the bark. The beetles also carry a fungus on their backs that infects the wood and clogs the water-conducting tissues of the tree.

Unfortunately, once the signs of the beetle infestation are clear, it's too late to save the tree. Insecticides won't help at this point. The only solution is to cut down the infected tree and get rid of it, and the beetles inside, before they spread to other trees. The solution for Abiquiu was to take out as many infected pines as soon as possible. Several private landowners and communities have paid thousands of dollars to have the infested trees removed. The problem for Abiquiu is that funds have not been set aside for such a large task. Therefore, our approach had to evolve into a tangible solution.

In early October 2003, Abiquiu began issuing free



This healthy piñon has become a rare sight in northern New Mexico, where in some areas 80 percent have been destroyed by the bark beetle.

firewood permits to the public. Corps operated lands were listed as zones on a topographical map, and distributed to the permit holders to inform them of their assigned location. Only certain areas that were deemed safe for public access, and free from potential environmental and cultural sensitive sites, were open to the public. A two-cord limit and other specific guidelines for safety and legality were incorporated into the permit.

Abiquiu then submitted an article in the local paper notifying the public of our intentions. By November, more than 50

permits were issued to local residents, and an estimated 75-80 cords of infested trees in the recreation areas had been removed. Permits are still being issued, and removal of the infested trees continues.

Abiquiu's innovation has saved taxpayers thousands of dollars, and given the few remaining live piñons a fighting chance for survival. The wood cut by locals will keep many local families warm during the cold winter months. Permit holders who don't plan on burning the wood this winter have been encouraged to stack the wood in a sunny place and wrap it in plastic to solarize, or kill the beetles. The remaining piñon trees will hopefully provide seeds for future stands of the once-dominant tree of New Mexico. □

Drug testing program to be implemented (Continued from page 6)

The Consequences or Disciplinary Action that can be taken upon a verified positive test for drugs can range from a reprimand, suspension or removal. Discipline is not required for the first finding of illegal drug use when the employee voluntarily admits usage, obtains counseling/rehab and remains drug-free. Removal from service is required upon the second finding of illegal drug use. □